

PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF INDIGENOUS THOUGHT

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In the following passage I shall attempt a discussion of the philosophical aspects of the Ejegham people in particular and the people of Ikom Division of Ogoja Province in general. I shall shelve all other philosophical thoughts and will offer for discussion one that is most prevalent and this centers around "Breath" or "Air" or what the people call "Efebhe."

Air which is breathed in and out is supposed to be the essence of life. It is life itself. The Ejegham people have a good grasp of the existence of a Supernatural Being. They realise that the Being can't be seen in the physical world. They associate Him with the invisible air that blows past us unseen; and they believe that the Being can see the universe and its inhabitants.

A child prior to its birth is said to be a block of molded clay and that it has its "animal life" which is the precursor of the actual life. At birth, the "air" or "breath" of God enters into it and it is this which constitutes life. The offspring can't acquire the name "child" until it shows the ability to breathe for at least a few moments. Thus in the event of abortion, even though the offspring can be physically seen, it is never referred to as child. If a person wants to report the incident, he says, "Ayim ejum chan?n," (*The "?" represents a sound which cannot be pronounced in English. Ed.*) literally meaning, "The woman has done not anything," "The beast passed out," or, "The thing went its way." All the foregoing translations of the statement seek to give the lifeless child no concrete name and to portray the idea of lifelessness, "airlessness" or "breathlessness" of the offspring that has been brought forth. The concept of "air," therefore, is taken to be an aspect of a Supernatural Power that keeps man going and the extermination of which culminates in death. A child presently born is noticed to breathe, then cry and search for its mother's breast to suck -- all quite instinctively. The Ejegham person would, expressing his surprise say, "Efebhe onbasi eri ag?-o," meaning, "The Air, or Breath of God, is wonderful." In the same way, when somebody dies they generally say, "Obasi atebe efebhe eje," meaning "God has taken his Air." A certain frustrated mother speaking to her sons once said, "Ah, the day when both my hands gripped my chest in a duel (is when she would die) and the Air of God breathed out, whatever happens to you I would care less and it is then you would remember the cares of a mother." Air in the present sense is analogous to the Christian concept of the soul which leaves the body after death. The Ejegham people believe in the second world -- to where dead bodies go, but they don't imply while holding this belief that the "Air" goes there too. Rather the "Air" returns to the Supernatural Being that gave it.

"Air" for the Ejegham people is both physical and mental power. Whenever, say, two persons are involved in a quarrel, or in a fight, one occasionally hears the prouder of the two mock the other, saying, "Have you any Air (power)? Dare joke with me and I'll teach you sense. You have no Air (strength) to work on the farm. You take pride in quarrelling people anywhere you see them. Talk nonsense now and I shall sue you to court and subsequently get you imprisoned and thus show you that I have Air (sense, power, money). Thus, the ability to exhibit physical prowess or constructive and rational thinking are the attributes of "Air." One would say sarcastically to a friend who had made persistent fruitless efforts to achieve a goal, "Ikom iri wa ag?-e," meaning, "You have a lot of 'Air' to be struggling on always."

The Ejegham people believe that the Air is responsible for man's ability to speak. When, therefore, a person engages in character assassination through, say, backbiting or any form of wicked pronouncement, his mouth is compared to a rotten sore and his speech, ("mouth's Air") is said to be bad. It is dogmatically held that when one slips and falls on the ground one would certainly wake up. But when one falls by his utterances (mouth's Air), that is when one tells falsehood, one could never rise up. The air or speech that leaves the mouth is never recaptured but lost forever. By this concept, one is rather required in principle to carry out an offence secretly than to speak of his

plans beforehand. Even if he fails to execute his plans afterwards, his speech (mouth Air) is a living witness to his ill-ideas. Whatever happens to somebody to whom a wicked act was promised, even by the remotest cause, the result is blamed on the person who promised the act. The man who makes such pronouncement is made by the community to swear by juju, pay fines and to appease the gods of the land before he is once again accepted into the society. The "mouth Air" when irresponsibly uttered can be an abomination. There is a common adage that says, "Ny? na nywuwa anne," which literally means, "It is the mouth that kills people." Unless one confessed to people what he intends to do or what he has done, one's secrets are always his own. It is the "mouth's Air" which betrays the mind. The Ejegham people in this aspect, with the utmost effort, refrain from anything which they calculate could kick against the norms of society, for anybody known to have a "fast tongue" or bad "mouth's Air" is always suspect wherever he goes and so enjoys little freedom of expression or listening to others' discussions.

The "Air" is a gift from the Almighty Being and should be used to manifest his goodness and kindness. It is believed that the "Air" bears luck and the good things of life. To demonstrate this, the Ejegham people of Ikom Division have from ancient times wished luck on their subjects by blowing air on them. If a junior person is going hunting or setting out on a journey an elder, if he or she approves of the adventure, would occasionally ask the person going away to stretch out both hands and Air, which might be accompanied by saliva is blown onto the palm. If one breaks a certain law and is looking for forgiveness and absolution, he gets this by having a priestess or whoever has the duty to do so blow air along with saliva onto his feet or the area of ground around his feet. This action seemingly buys him back from evil powers which up till that moment were bent on taking revenge on the culprit. This philosophical concept of the "Air" among the Ejegham people exposes their inner selves. It shows that whatever they are and can do depends on the "Air" which is both the essence and the controller of life.

The "Air" is regarded as a cult, an association to which certain individuals can hold membership. The idea of membership here hasn't the same meaning as that when people belong to social clubs. It is rather a becoming of. It is the meaning of the "Air" itself, such that the individual and the "Air" become an inseparable whole; and the individual, like the "Air" has the powers of the latter. Thus, one occasionally hears people say, "Ndi ka Efebhe," which literally means, "I am in the Air." The being "in" something is a way of expression which portrays not only the physical but also the organic presences of one thing in another. People about to enter the military force or who are to take up assignments where their lives are in danger seek to "become Air." They talk of "drinking Air," "Efebhe ew?-?m," or "Efebhe egbe-em ka biji." The idea of drinking goes to show the people's belief that there cannot be a union of one body in another unless each enters into the system of the other. Thus, to "become Air" one has to drink the prepared charm or concoction from a medicine or juju man. He drinks this through the mouth or cuts it into his body so that the Air can travel by the blood and gets incorporated in the systems of the body. The person who has the "Air" has the ability of becoming invisible at will, and of moving as fast as air. An example is offered by any military officer who is believed to be able to vanish or disappear when he is confronted by enemies. By thus disappearing he is able to evade the danger of death. Such stories depicting the ability of disappearance are always heard when tales of old war warriors are told or when one escapes from imminent danger. Behind the idea of "becoming Air" the Ejegham people believe that man has many capabilities and these are vested in the "Air." It is a common experience that anybody who narrowly escapes an accident or who does a family usual thing, is associated with a dual nature, that of his physical body and that of his "Air" or invisible self.

Let's consider another aspect of the "Air." Occasionally a wretched man found begging in the street is heard to cry out asking, "n?g? yen ka eji nne akpini Efebhe-a?" "Have you ever seen where somebody lives on by Air?" In the statement he asks whether anybody is known to live only by breathing Air in and out without however taking any food. Food takes care of the body functions, he maintains. The statement seems to indicate the absence of confidence of the man in the "Air" to provide for human beings as contrary to the views held in the discussions above. Here, the "Air"

seems to have none of its characteristics and functions. But the Ejegham people don't seem to make this sort of deduction. By that statement they imply that one should be able to help oneself before one is helped. One must of necessity take food to support his physical body, must take medicine to cure diseases, must consult native doctors or medicine men if one wants to acquire Supernatural powers of invisibility and so on. It is when the initiative is taken that the "Air" or "Breath" can therefore take care of man's other requirements in all their ramifications.